

Jerusalem Perspective

A Monthly Report on Research into the Words of Jesus

Number Three

December 1987

אמן — Amen Introduction or Response?

English-speaking readers of the Gospels are familiar with the expression, "Verily I say unto you..." which Jesus apparently used frequently. It is a strange sort of idiom, and without parallel in ancient literature before the time of Jesus. It seems even stranger when one discovers that "verily" is usually the translation of the Greek word ἀμήν (*a-MEN*), a transcription in Greek letters of the Hebrew word אמן (*a-MEN*).

Affirmation and Acceptance

"Amen" is the archetypal biblical response of affirmation and acceptance. It appears thirty times in Hebrew Scripture, and always carries nuances of truth, trust and reliability. Whether it was used as a response to curses or blessings, to prayers of praise and thanks, or to prayers of petition, it expressed the speaker's endorsement of the preceding statement or event.

Deuteronomy 27 records that in response to each of the twelve curses pronounced by the Levites at Mount Ebal, the people responded with "amen," which was a way of accepting the curses as consequences of violating the stated prohibitions.

"Amen" was also a common

response to blessings. "Amen, amen" was what the people said when Ezra blessed the LORD (Nehemiah 8:6), and "amen" was the people's response to David's "Blessed is the LORD, the God of Israel, from eternity to eternity" (I Chronicles 16:36). To this day it is considered an obligation under Jewish religious law to say "amen" when one hears a blessing recited.

In many instances "amen" served to seal a covenant between individuals or between man and

God. Within the Dead Sea sect of the Essenes, for example, priests and Levites pronounced a series of blessings and curses at initiation ceremonies, to which the initiates were required to respond, "Amen, amen."

The Pharisees likewise considered the saying of "amen" as the first step of a covenant relationship with God. For them, "amen" alone was sufficient to signify one's willingness to accept the "Kingdom of Heaven"—God's authority in one's life.

'Verily' or 'Amen'

It is not surprising to find the word "amen" attributed to Jesus in the Gospels. "Amen" appears else-

(continued on page 2)

Translating the Gospels to Hebrew

According to Luke 1:1, many written accounts of Jesus' life were in circulation, and the early Church fathers are united in conveying the tradition that the apostle Matthew wrote a Gospel in Hebrew. For example, Papias, the bishop of Hierapolis in Asia Minor during the mid-second century A.D., wrote:

Matthew put down the words of the Lord in the Hebrew language, and others have translated them, each as best he could.

(Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* III 39, 16)

The scholars of the Jerusalem School for the Study of the Synoptic Gospels also contend that there was a basic text of Jesus' life story written in Hebrew. They concluded this not merely on the basis of the Church fathers' writings, but because the Greek texts of the synoptic Gospels show so much evidence of being "translation Greek"—Hebrew idioms and sentence structure in Greek dress. Consequently, they believe that translating the Greek text into Hebrew often helps one to understand a Gospel passage in its original context.

(continued on page 2)

Amen

(continued from page 1)

where in the New Testament, notably in the epistles of Paul who usually used it to conclude an expression of praise to God.

Nor is it odd that "amen" was simply transliterated from Hebrew into Greek. Its use had become so common in Greek-speaking synagogues and churches that the New Testament writers generally felt translation unnecessary. What is unusual is to find "amen" used as the beginning of a statement rather than as a response.

If English translations of the Bible are correct, Jesus would seem to have been the only person to have used "amen" in such an un-Hebraic way. Assuming this to be the case, many scholars have supposed that "Amen I say to you..." was an example of Jesus' uniqueness, while other less conservative scholars have suggested that it was simply a convenient heading for invented sayings attributed to Jesus.

What Did Jesus Say?

Jerusalem scholar Robert Lindsey has come to a different conclusion based upon his research into the Hebraic background of Jesus' life and teaching. He has published his findings in an article entitled "'Verily' or 'Amen'—What Did Jesus Say?" (*Christian News from Israel*, Vol. XXV, No. 3).

JERUSALEM PERSPECTIVE

Editor

Jeffrey Magnuson

JERUSALEM PERSPECTIVE is an independent report published monthly by David Bivin, director of the Jerusalem School for the Study of the Synoptic Gospels. Unsigned articles are attributable to the publisher. Subscription prices (including airmail postage): one year, US\$36; two years, US\$60; three years, US\$75. Gift subscriptions: US\$30 for first, US\$25 for each additional. Back issues are available at US\$3 per issue. Copyright, 1987, by David Bivin. Printed in Israel.

P.O. Box 19733
Jerusalem, Israel

As he examined the Gospel texts, Lindsey detected a pattern. Almost every "amen" spoken by Jesus in the Gospels is preceded by a statement or event which had attracted Jesus' notice, and is followed by a teaching in which he emphasized the significance of what came before.

In other words, Jesus' "amen" was not connected to "I say to you..." but, as in normal Hebrew usage, stood alone as an affirmative response to what preceded it. Jesus apparently did not say "Amen!" unless a statement or deed was worthy of further comment, because he always followed with "I say to you..." and additional instruction.

Amen in the Gospels

"Amen" appears ninety-nine times in the Gospels, always followed by two Greek words meaning "I say to you." It is an interesting study to use a concordance and examine the teachings in which Jesus used "amen," or as English translations have it, "verily" or "truly."

In Matthew 21:28-32, for example, Jesus affirmed his listeners' answer by saying "Amen!" and went on to make a further point prefixed with "I say to you...." Luke 18:15-17 records a scene in which Jesus himself made a statement, emphasized its importance by concluding it with "Amen!" and then elaborated further by adding a statement beginning "I say to you...." In each instance "Amen!" comes after a significant statement or action, and is followed by further teaching. This is the Hebraic way of using "amen," and the way one would expect a Jewish teacher such as Jesus to speak.

In the next issue of JERUSALEM PERSPECTIVE, we will examine more closely Jesus' use of "amen," focusing particularly on one instance for which Dr. Lindsey has discovered an intriguing parallel in the book of Jeremiah.

Translating the Gospels

(continued from page 1)

Two Stages

A Hebrew translation is prepared in two stages. First, an examination is undertaken to determine the usual Hebrew equivalent in the Septuagint for each Greek word in the passage. The Septuagint is the second-century B.C. Greek version of the Hebrew Bible and apocrypha. It is used as a touchstone because it strongly influenced Hebrew-to-Greek translators of succeeding generations.

Second, post-biblical material such as the Dead Sea Scrolls and rabbinic literature is examined to determine whether there are alternate Hebrew equivalents for Gospel words. This is necessary because there occasionally developed different ways of expressing certain words in Hebrew. For example, apparently the biblical word בא (*ba*), in the sense of "enter," had been totally replaced in first-century Hebrew with the word נכנס (*nik·NAS*).

It also is necessary to consult post-biblical Jewish sources when a particular word in the Gospels is rare or non-existent in the Septuagint. For example, such well-known first-century Hebrew expressions as בשר ודם (*ba·SAR ve·DAM*, flesh and blood) and מלכות שמים (*mal·KUT sha·MA·yim*, Kingdom of Heaven) are not found in the Hebrew Scriptures. Thus there are no Septuagintal equivalents for them.

Enhanced Understanding

The Jerusalem School believes that a knowledge of the Hebrew language and culture of Jesus' day will greatly enhance our understanding of his life and teachings. Of course, one does not find Hebrew lying beneath every Greek "stone" in the synoptic Gospels. There is, however, considerable evidence of Hebraic under-texts, and efforts to discover and learn from them are amply rewarded.

Hebrew Nuggets

The first sound of the second syllable of **יְשׁוּעָה** (*ye-SHU-a'*) is the "sh" sound. This is represented by **ש** (*shin*), the twenty-first letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Written with three points or teeth, it got its name from the Hebrew word for "tooth" because of the pictograph upon which it was based.

ש usually stands for the "sh" sound, but sometimes for the "s" sound. In order to distinguish between these two pronunciations, a small dot often is added at the upper right-hand corner of the letter — **שׁ**. When the reader is to pronounce the **ש** as "s," the dot is placed at the upper left-hand corner of the letter — **שׂ**. In this case the letter is called *sin*.

Without Vowels

The Hebrew alphabet's twenty-two letters do not include visually identifiable vowels like a, e, i, o, u. Vowels exist and are pronounced, but are not a formal part of the alphabet.

This lack of vowel symbols was remedied by the creation of vowel signs, which were gradually developed in the sixth and seventh centuries when Hebrew began to wane as a spoken language. The vowels were not written when Hebrew was a living language, which is borne out again today in modern Israel where newspapers and books are printed without vowels.

Can you understand English without vowels? Israelis read Hebrew in the same way you have just read the preceding sentence. Although it is more difficult to read without vowels in English than in Hebrew, even in English it is not impossible when reading words one already knows.

More Mistranslations

We have previously explained how the first two sounds in Jesus'

name are mispronounced today by English speakers. The third sound also is mispronounced—as "z" instead of "sh." This happened because Greek, like many other languages, has no "sh" sound. **יְשׁוּעָה**

the *tse-RE*, this is a vowel sound. The symbol, **א**, used to represent this sound is called *shu-RUK*. It is written as a straight line with a dot to its left. In the system of transliteration used in JERUSALEM PERSPECTIVE,

this vowel is represented by the letter "u."

One reason for learning Hebrew is to be able to pronounce correctly the many biblical names. The fourth sound in **יְשׁוּעָה**, like the first three, has come to be mispronounced in English. We cannot blame translators in this case.

They transcribed this sound accurately, but English is not a phonetic language and "u" can be pronounced in more than one way. At some point the "u" in Jesus came to be pronounced as in "cut," and so we say "Jee-zuhs."

Lesson Three: shin & shu-RUK

Jesus' Hebrew name is composed of three syllables. In the first two lessons of "Hebrew Nuggets" we learned the sounds of the first syllable—the "y" sound, yod, and the "e" sound, tse-RE. In this lesson we will learn the two sounds of the second syllable.

was transcribed to Greek as **Ἰησοῦς** (*Iesus*), the Greek *sigma* being the closest approximation of the Hebrew *shin*.

Translators of English versions of the New Testament transliterated the Greek transcription of a Hebrew name, instead of returning to the original Hebrew. This was doubly unfortunate, first because the "sh" sound exists in English, and second because in English the "s" sound can shift to the "z" sound, which is what happened in the case of the pronunciation of "Jesus."

Note that the "sh" sound is preserved by translators of the Old Testament in "Jeshua" and "Yeshua."

shu-RUK

The fourth sound one hears in the name *ye-SHU-a'* is the "u" sound, as in the word "flu." Like

In Other Words

The first three sounds of *ye-SHU-a'* appear in many other Hebrew words. If we pronounce only the first three sounds of *ye-SHU-a'*, we get **יֶשֶׁה** (*yesh*), itself a frequently used word meaning "there exists." *yesh tik-VA*, for example, means "there is hope." By rearranging these two letters and one vowel symbol, we can make another word: **שֶׁשֶׁ** (*shesh*), the feminine form of the number six.

With the addition of the *shu-RUK*, we can also read the Hebrew word for licorice: **שֶׁשֶׁשׁ** (*shush*). Although it is not found in the vocabulary of the Bible, it does appear in rabbinic literature, and is a tasty word in its own right.

We have now learned four of the six sounds that form יְשׁוּעָה. In Lesson Four we will learn the remaining sounds of that name.

Torah has always been the focus of rabbinic teaching.

Unfortunately, the Hebrew word *תורה* (*to-RA*) is usually translated in English simply as "law," which has created the impression that it has to do only with commandments. This is not the case at all. The Torah was given by God as guidelines for a whole way of life. A better translation would be "God's instructions."

Written Torah, *תורה שבכתב* (*to-RA she-bik·TAV*), consists of the instruction God gave to Israel at Sinai contained in the five books of Moses — Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Israel's sages believed that in addition to this written revelation, Moses received further instruction which was communicated orally. These added instructions were the beginning of the Oral Torah, *תורה שבעל פה* (*to-RA she-be·'AL pe*).

Living Tradition

The orthodox Jewish view of Jesus' day was that this Oral Torah had been handed down from generation to generation from the time it was initiated with Moses. Along with forty-two verbal commandments given to Moses at Sinai, the Oral Torah included the precepts and interpretations implied in the Written Torah. It also came to include the legal decisions of rabbinical courts and the oral traditions which first-century sages had received from their predecessors.

The Oral Torah was a living tradition with the authority to interpret and at times modify the written code. A contemporary analogy is found in the body of legal precedent that develops as judges hand down rulings which interpret the laws enacted by legislators. Such judges, like the early sages, apply the written law as cases are brought before them, and thus create a tradition of interpretations and precedents which is no less authoritative than the laws

Written and Oral Torah

themselves.

The "tradition of the elders," besides claiming an authority and continuity equal to that of the Written Torah, also claimed to be its authentic living interpretation and essential complement. It occupied a place above the Written Torah in the same sense that a house must be above its foundation. Each, however, was dependent upon the other.

Sayings of the Fathers

Evidence of the authenticity accorded to the Oral Torah is found in a rabbinical work entitled *אבות* (*a·VOT*), the Hebrew word for "fathers." This book presents the accumulated tradition of the forefathers of Israel, and begins with these words which show how the Oral Torah developed:

Moses received [oral] Torah at Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua, and Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the prophets, and the prophets transmitted it to the men of the Great Assembly.

This is followed by a series of sayings attributed to the men of the Great Assembly, a saying of Simon the Righteous, one of the last survivors of the Great Assembly, and then a saying of Antigonus of Socho which he received from Simon the Righteous. From this verse until the conclusion of *Avot* there follows the sayings of a string of teachers, each of whom received his tradition from his predecessors.

Transcribing the Oral Torah

Rabbi Yehuda ha-Nasi was the first to compile the Oral Torah in written form for public use. His

work is known as the Mishnah (*משנה*), and was completed in about

200 A.D. Once he broke with tradition, other collections of the Oral Torah were made which incorporated material not included in the Mishnah, notably the Gemara (*גמרה*) which is a commentary on the Mishnah. In time, the Gemara and Mishnah were printed together and known collectively as the Talmud (*תלמוד*).

This work exists in two versions: the Jerusalem Talmud compiled in Israel, and the Babylonian Talmud compiled by Jewish sages in Babylon. Being the work of different schools of scholarship, the Gemara in each version differs considerably, but the Mishnah in both is that of Rabbi Yehuda.

The Babylonian Talmud, the Gemara of which is written mostly in Aramaic, was completed about 500 A.D., and is a gigantic sea of rabbinic learning consisting of two and one-half million words filling 5,894 pages approximately 27 by 36 centimeters in size. The Jerusalem Talmud preceded the Babylonian version by about 100 years and fills 574 pages. Its Gemara is written mostly in Hebrew. Today the Babylonian Talmud is central in Jewish religious education, and when the word "Talmud" appears alone it is the Babylonian version to which it refers.

The Written Torah is not viewed as something separate from the Talmud, but rather as the foundation upon which the "house" of the Talmud is built. Therefore, a thorough knowledge of Written Torah is a prerequisite of Talmudic study. As in the days of Jesus, every Orthodox Jewish child today grows up learning the Bible, and familiarity with the five books of Moses is considered an important first step in studying the Talmud.

We will begin to examine Jesus' observance of the Oral Torah in the next issue of JERUSALEM PERSPECTIVE.